

## **SUBMISSION ON DEVELOPING RURAL TOURISM**

### **Introduction**

Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT) is the representative body for adventure activity providers, with over 200 members across the island of Ireland. The association was set up in 2018 to develop this exciting and growing sector in a responsible and sustainable manner.

Members include adventure centres, tour operators, and businesses providing archery, hiking, biking, surfing, kayaking, horse-riding, fishing, sailing, whale watching, zip-wiring and many more.

### **Executive Summary**

This submission focuses on access, infrastructure, and a public body focus on supporting the successful growth of the adventure activity tourism sector. All comments are made with sustainable tourism in mind.

### **Main Submission**

#### **1. Diversifying the rural tourism offering: attractions, activity tourism, creative tourism, screen tourism, and the night-time economy:**

- Activity tourism is a massive growth sector in rural Ireland yet it being hampered by the insurance issue. If you take Bike Park Ireland as a prime example of a farmer who diversified into mountain bike tourism from farming in Tipperary. The business ran successfully for 5 years but had to close due to inability to access insurance.
- The night-time economy in rural Ireland is under threat as there is a serious lack of transport infrastructure. Pubs and restaurants should be given exemptions from the Taxi license and be allowed to run guests home in cars, not for profit but to allow them to come to pubs etc in the evenings. For tourism businesses, this would allow the spending of guests to be spread around a local area rather than retained in one location. With increased costs for rural pubs and restaurants this winter, this is a small thing that could make a big difference.

- Access for all to the mountains and highlands of Ireland is a huge issue and one which the IAAT is actively working on. The department should be extremely active in how Irish and international holiday makers to rural Ireland can access the wild lands of Ireland. The benefits to everyone across society, from rural business to a healthier Ireland in general, is immeasurable. Take Westport as an example where the ability to climb Croagh Patrick and cycle the Greenway have transformed the town. Or indeed Killarney and access to the Reeks and their efforts to build a greenway. These examples of where access has been provided with extremely positive outcomes have been delivered in a considered and responsible manner in terms of biodiversity, over-tourism and other factors. We also recognise the work of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy in addressing this issue.
- There is a missed trick in the recent Marine Spatial plan to have a special note for marine tourism. Taking examples like the Skellig Islands or indeed the Aran Islands, there is a real appetite to travel to the different parts of Ireland, away from the so-called “honey pot” destinations and therefore avoiding over-tourism. There should be a massive programme of pontoon and access buildings to all of Irish marine area so that it becomes a greater part of our heritage. At the moment, public appreciation and engagement in our marine life is having a rebirth with wild swimming for example, but this needs to be harnessed and matched with infrastructural investment.

## **2. Outdoor recreation and outdoor recreation infrastructure, including sustainable outdoor-and nature-based tourism:**

- Outdoor recreation and outdoor recreation infrastructure is an area that is falling far behind in the development of Ireland as a tourism destination, particularly when compared to other countries in this region. The funding announced for water sports facilities in 2021 was not done with consultation with commercial activity providers and therefore, we as a sector cannot be sure if the developments are even in the right locations. It also appears that the timeline for delivery is not on schedule, and to the best of our knowledge, not one of the developments has even come through the planning process yet. There needs to be significant engagement with the businesses proposed to operate at these facilities at County Council level; if they are not brought on board then it may be considered an effort without key stakeholder engagement, which wastes time and creates frustrations. It is the commercial activity operators who deliver the sustainable outdoor-and-nature-based tourism.

- It's *vital* that there is engagement and cooperation from the Department of Tourism with local County Councils, so that an all-Ireland approach is taken with consistencies from authority to authority. This weakness has been encountered by our members working cross-county, where there is no consistency in key areas with separate county councils e.g. Planning. If public bodies continue to operate in silo, then it will continue to lead to business activity and a lack of infrastructure which is what is holding us back at present.
- Outdoor and nature-based tourism needs access areas, car parks, bike racks, bike paths and all the other infrastructure involved with growing an area where nothing has been done for so long. This needs innovative thought e.g. composting loos at remote locations, engaging with Coillte to provide access to all forests and to promote responsible access to the general public. For instance, we have concerns that people do not know that you can go for a walk in any Coillte forest in the country.

### **3. Developing a tourism strategy for Gaeltacht areas:**

- As with all areas, and with consideration to what is addressed elsewhere in this submission, access and infrastructure is also essential for Gaeltacht areas.

### **4. Opportunities and supports for agritourism in rural Ireland:**

- Agritourism is one of the ways of improving rural tourism's accommodation problem. If farmers can be given an incentive to bring their excess accommodation into the housing stock, then this will improve Agritourism across the board.

In the past, there was a significant tradition of B&Bs in rural Ireland, but this has died of over the years due to a combination of over-regulation and declining margins. However, with the current high prices and lack of alternatives, it should be encouraged. With heating and electricity increasing, a public information campaign to showcase the benefits of renting out rooms, alongside some form of a tax break, has the potential of being extremely successful.

### **5. Rural tourist accommodation: standards, regulation, and challenges**

- There is a huge issue with the lack of rural accommodation for business looking to grow and expand in rural Ireland. Taking Connemara as an example, there has not

been a new hotel approved since the 1990s, and current stock is being taken off the market for varying reasons. You also have a case where it is proving extremely difficult to get employees in rural Ireland, as the shortage of housing is a massive issue. Yet the planning office appears to be refusing development on new houses. At some stage there must be a strategy for growth, not maintaining the status quo. The standards and regulations to accommodation are sufficient. The supply is not.